

# The Good Friday dis-agreement

## Sport and contested identities in Northern Ireland since 1998

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### Introduction

The assertion that 'sport and national identity, no matter how complex the specific relationships, are inextricably linked'<sup>1</sup> is one that retains considerable resonance in the case of Northern Ireland. It is fair to conclude that an ethno-sectarian 'fault-line' has been present within sport across the country, or at least in the vast majority of cases, for much of the last century. However, what is curious is how this complex relationship between sport and identity politics has retained its potency well into the twenty-first century, despite significant improvements in the political and social landscape of Northern Ireland. Equally, it is a remarkable testimony to the sporting people of Northern Ireland, in particular, that their achievements on the world stage have remained so pronounced, despite the often-turbulent nature of everyday life in that country. What is clear is the very close relationship between sport and identity formation in Northern Ireland, even some two decades after the signing of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998 when, it was believed, many of the questions concerning identity politics in the country had been addressed, remains all too clear.

An increased understanding of the interplay between sport and identity has been an earnest pursuit of academics working across a number of disciplines since at least the 1960s. However, it has been suggested that it was from the early 1990s, in particular, that sport's unique qualities in this regard began to be recognised in its broadest sense.<sup>2</sup> This timeline for sport, as a tool for exploring issues of contested identity in Northern Ireland and similarly divided societies around the world, correlates with this chapter's examination of sport in that country since the signing of the GFA in 1998. Polley's 'type 3' approach to sports history looms large in this respect, and will be the principal foundation for the examination of the issues that follow. Polley's view is that, 'Type 3 sports history is the contextual analysis of those events. . . . It is an outward looking definition, one that sees sport

as being interrelated with social, political, religious, economic, and cultural trends'.<sup>3</sup>

To date, the majority of attention from researchers and others writing on this subject matter has, perhaps unsurprisingly, focused upon international soccer, particularly in the period since 1998. The recent player eligibility dispute, between the football federations of Northern Ireland and their contemporaries in the Republic of Ireland, is the foremost example of controversy on a wider scale and centred upon the very nature of contested identities in Northern Ireland.<sup>4</sup> This chapter aims to add to the extensive work on international soccer and player eligibility that has been published since the GFA, but also builds upon this published work through an analysis of other "sites" of contested sporting identities that have emerged since 1998. Principally, this will involve scrutiny of soccer at the club level in Northern Ireland, as well as a sample of Commonwealth and Olympic sports and, finally, an analysis of some recent developments within the indigenous (to Ireland) sporting body, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), which again has particular resonance within the context of Northern Ireland. Far from obviating the well-documented case of international soccer completely from the analysis that follows, this chapter offers a consideration of whether identity issues existing at international level are replicated, or possibly have even further refined, any division existing within the domestic club game in Northern Ireland. This is useful both as a case study underpinning this chapter's overarching analysis, and also to the preexisting scholarship, which (as indicated) is overwhelmingly concerned with international soccer, on the one hand, or the pre-GFA domestic club game, on the other.

### Club soccer in Northern Ireland

Soccer in Northern Ireland, both at international and at club levels, has always been recognised as being 'more than just a game'. There is one view, in particular, emerging from the existing historiography surrounding the 'national' (as this term is contested) football stadium, Windsor Park, and its club side in residence, Linfield FC, that is particularly significant to the following analysis:

It is argued that those fans who congregate at Windsor Park to support Linfield Football Club and the Northern Ireland national team regard the stadium not only as a built environment which demands collective devotion, but also as a metaphor for an imagined Ulster . . . Windsor Park has become a site for the reactive cultural resistance of a certain group of men as they endeavour to come to terms with socioeconomic change together with the politico-cultural demands of the Collective Other in the form of Irish nationalism.<sup>5</sup>

Within an all-encompassing historical fault-line, present throughout all levels of soccer in Northern Ireland, it is also significant that Bairner and Shirlow position the national soccer stadium itself as a contested site of identity. Until comparatively recently, the accepted view has remained one of international soccer in Northern Ireland as being a ready microcosm for a series of wider, contested identities defining sport in Northern Ireland. Indeed current international manager, Michael O'Neill, recognised, upon his appointment, that he had inherited a team, and by extension a home stadium, that remained highly contested sites and symbols of identity. He can, however, be afforded considerable credit for his efforts in creating an identity for the Northern Ireland international team that is now both attractive and acceptable to both Ulster Unionists and Irish nationalists alike, albeit the latter has still some distance to travel before being fully convinced of the *bona fides* of this 'new' dispensation:

When I took over the team didn't really have a strong identity. We would go to the stadium and there was nothing on the wall that made you feel like you were going to play for Northern Ireland. . . . The work that we do with the IFA in terms of the under-age players and club NI is something we want to continue to develop. I just hope that every young player that is born in Northern Ireland and plays football aspires to play for Northern Ireland.<sup>6</sup>

While international soccer in Northern Ireland is well documented and addressed in the academic realm, there exists a comparative paucity of scholarly work surrounding club football in Northern Ireland, particularly addressing the period following the signing of the GFA. The dispute between both Lurgan Celtic FC and Donegal Celtic FC and the Irish Football League (IFL) in 2000, which was eventually resolved by the Equality Commission (EC) in Northern Ireland, is perhaps an obvious starting point for this analysis. *The Irish Football League Papers* held at the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) in Belfast contain the correspondence between the two clubs, the IFL, the EC, as well as others with vested interests in the outcome of the case, such as local politicians. The refusal on the part of the IFL to grant admission to the Irish League (senior football) to the two clubs in question was the fifth and tenth time respectively that Lurgan Celtic and Donegal Celtic had been denied entry to the senior club game in Northern Ireland.<sup>7</sup> As with Derry City FC a generation previously, in the face of such alleged intransigence it was reported that 'both clubs have flirted with joining the League of Ireland but (such a move) has been rendered too costly'.<sup>8</sup>

The referral of the case to the EC begins a process in which it is again alleged (by the two clubs and others) that discrimination based on grounds of perceived religious or racial affiliations was the real reason why their

apparently genuine claims, at least as they understood them for elevation to the senior game in Northern Ireland, was being denied. Donegal Celtic FC alleged, in a questionnaire they completed for the EC concerning the case, that 'It is believed that the club was perceived as pro-nationalist and pro-catholic and accordingly the Irish Football League Limited unlawfully discriminated in the refusal of goods, facilities and services to the club'.<sup>9</sup> Donegal Celtic Football Club suggested this alleged discrimination was unlawful in the wake of equality legislation established in 1998, which makes clear that:

By refusing or deliberately omitting to provide him with goods, facilities or services of the same quality, in the same manner and on the same terms as are normal in his case in relation to other members of the public or (where the person so seeking belongs to a section of the public) to other members of that section.<sup>10</sup>

Such treatment of perceived Catholic-nationalist clubs contravened numerous safeguards that were enshrined within the GFA. In particular, 'the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity' was, as was alleged, violated. The new constitutional arrangement included 'a clear formulation of the rights not to be discriminated against and to equality of opportunity in both the public and private sectors'.<sup>11</sup> Upon renewed inspection, it appears that the public and political rhetoric of progress and reconciliation associated with the post-GFA era, was not reflected within the private confines of the IFL's admission processes.

A view that nationalist clubs in Northern Ireland have operated amid an historical "siege mentality" is also worth considering in the context of this discussion. This view is important in understanding whether matters of contested identities retain other contributing factors to be unpacked beyond any apparent binary distinction between the seemingly 'oppressed' and their 'oppressor'. Also relevant to this aspect of the case were views expressed by Sinn Féin MLA Mary Nelis, who was also the vice-chairperson of the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure committee at the time of the case. She noted the apparent exclusive nature of the Irish Football League's membership in a letter to the IFL, highlighting a number of concerns she had regarding its capacity to operate fairly and independently. Nelis claimed 'they (the two clubs in question) had been refused (admission to the league) based on an internal vote taken by 14 unionist clubs'.<sup>12</sup> The IFL confirmed in its response to an EC questionnaire that 'No equal opportunities training or advice is provided by the Irish Football League limited . . . The Irish Football League limited is not required to and does not monitor the religious affiliation of club representatives'.<sup>13</sup> The clear lack of any equal opportunities policy within the IFL at that time did little to assuage the

claims, whether founded or otherwise, of discrimination against perceived pro-nationalist clubs, such as those expressed by Nelis in her letter to the league's governing body in Northern Ireland.

The minutes of the 2000/2001 Annual General Meeting of the IFL would appear to substantiate the views of Mary Nelis, if not explicitly so. The minutes note how two applications had been received for re-admittance into the First Division of the IFL for the 2000/2001 season. The applicants were Ballyclare Comrades Football Club and Donegal Celtic Football Club. Readers learn that 'in accordance with article 32 of the League's Articles Association, a ballot vote was taken which resulted as follows – for Ballyclare Comrades 37 votes; for Donegal Celtic no votes'.<sup>14</sup> It is hardly surprising given the landslide nature of the result, in favour of what few would dispute to be perceived as a pro-unionist club, at the expense of Donegal Celtic FC, from West Belfast, and for a tenth time, that it was, at least at one level, worth looking more closely at how decisions concerning admission to senior domestic football in Northern Ireland were arrived at. Although Mary Nelis was a Sinn Féin MLA speaking on behalf of a perceived Catholic-nationalist club, the IFL's on-going attempts to prevent the admission of Lurgan Celtic FC and Donegal Celtic FC is noteworthy. The challenge of admitting two clubs from a perceived nationalist background again reflects the contested nature of the much-documented relationship between sport and identity in Northern Ireland. Taking place following the signing of the GFA, this episode reinforces Bairner and Shirlow's views on sports role within a wider divided society, advanced in 1998:

Undoubtedly, sport does not condition the ethno-sectarian conflict that exists, in Northern Ireland or elsewhere, but it does provide a collateral explanation and an arena within which the different political, cultural and territorial interests of the two communities are articulated and acted out. In this context, ethnic identity and sporting allegiance are used to identify how the perpetuation of sectarianised identities influences the complexity and actuality of sectarianism within Northern Irish society.<sup>15</sup>

If the views of the perceived nationalist clubs in this dispute are to be believed, then there is a tentative foundation for constructing an all-encompassing fault-line that includes soccer's governing body (IFA), the Northern Ireland international team, the IFL's internal admission structures, and, in a general sense, club soccer in Northern Ireland. Within such a potential framework, it might be reasonable to conclude that club soccer in Northern Ireland has as many unresolved issues concerning the question of identity politics as international soccer has had in the years since the GFA. Just as Neil Lennon, who significantly is also a Lurgan native, found that his association with Glasgow Celtic FC had ramifications for his career as a Northern Ireland international in 2002, it appears that Lurgan Celtic

felt their denial to Irish League membership was on account of similar connotations associated with their own ethos and latent identity. This fear of their own name (Celtic) contributing to their exclusion from the senior leagues in Northern Ireland, was detailed in a letter written in 1999 to Mo Mowlam, who at that time was the British government's Secretary of State for Northern Ireland:

We are not a catholic club or a nationalist club. We do not believe that any club can be categorised as such and we are entirely non-sectarian although with the name Lurgan Celtic we are perceived as coming from the catholic or nationalist community. It is clear and beyond argument that the catholic or nationalist community is significantly under-represented at official level in both the Irish Football League and the Irish Football Association.<sup>16</sup>

It is equally clear that in this dispute the blame lay firmly within the IFL admissions structure itself, including over those years immediately following the GFA. A somewhat inadequate and dated admissions process allowed for an elite group of perceived Protestant-unionist clubs to prevent the accession of two perceived Catholic-nationalist clubs into the ranks of the senior game in Northern Ireland. This practice became untenable throughout the GFA era, and the legal case was eventually dropped in June 2002. At that point the two clubs were finally admitted to the Irish League, where they have remained ever since, albeit among its lower divisions. The EC press release issued at the time of the case being dropped hinted at a brighter future of co-operation within club soccer in Northern Ireland, one that would reflect the new shared society envisaged by the GFA, as the three parties to the dispute had 'agreed to focus on the future in a spirit of goodwill and co-operation'.<sup>17</sup>

### Commonwealth and Olympic Games

In the years since the GFA, a significant issue has arisen in relation to athletes from Northern Ireland participating in both the Commonwealth and Olympic Games. The "issue" does not relate to the right of athletes from Northern Ireland to compete at either event, rather the fact that athletes have often competed at the respective games under the flag of a different nation. It must be noted that this phenomenon existed prior to the GFA. Wayne McCullough, a Protestant boxer from a loyalist area of Belfast, was even the flagbearer for Ireland at the opening ceremony of the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, before going on to win a gold medal for Northern Ireland at the 1990 Commonwealth Games.<sup>18</sup> This is not unique to athletes who represent Northern Ireland at the Commonwealth Games, as England, Wales and Scotland are also distinctly represented at the Commonwealth



events. While some athletes from the latter nations then undergo a seamless transition to represent the Great Britain team (Team GB) at the Olympics, athletes from Northern Ireland encounter an all-too-familiar dilemma that can, again, be linked to the issue of contested identities within the sporting arena.

Over the last decade there has been a number of athletes that have represented Northern Ireland at the Commonwealth Games, before subsequently choosing to represent Team Ireland at the Olympic Games. The foremost example of this practice concerns the sport of amateur boxing. Belfast and Ireland boxer Paddy Barnes, in particular, has been a figure that has often attracted controversy in his many media interviews surrounding his well-defined sense of Irish identity. A Commonwealth gold medalist in both 2010 and 2014 while representing Northern Ireland, alongside Olympic bronze medals in 2008 and 2012 when representing Ireland, Barnes is an impressive international boxer by any standards. Indeed, Barnes's achievements led him to be chosen as the flag bearer for Team Ireland at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>19</sup> However, it was at the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow when Barnes was involved in an incident, which goes some way to illustrating why many Catholic and nationalist athletes have felt somewhat more culturally comfortable representing Team Ireland at the Olympic Games as opposed to Team GB. While on the medals podium, having secured a gold medal in his division representing Northern Ireland, Barnes was clearly visible saying, 'that's not my anthem', as *Danny Boy* began to play in the arena. Barnes was clearly less than enthused with the anthem and flag he was representing, and was unequivocal in his defence of his comment. 'Let's be honest, not only is it not my anthem but it is nobody's anthem because Northern Ireland hasn't got a national anthem. I think it's time we had a proper flag and a proper national anthem.'<sup>20</sup>

The comparable example of Spain, and the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games being staged in a Spanish region with a sizeable separatist Catalan ethnic group, highlights the degree of acceptance of alternative views that will most likely be required for progress in Northern Ireland to be made in this realm. To quell simmering Catalan nationalist aspirations, under a wave of Spanish patriotism in the lead-up to the event, an Olympic pact was approved by the Spanish government six weeks before the Games commenced, which ensured that Catalan symbols would be included in the Games in a dignified manner.<sup>21</sup>

The views of nationalist sportsmen, such as Barnes, appear to have significant concurrence with those of nationalist political representatives in Northern Ireland. The government minister responsible for sporting matters at the time of the Commonwealth Games in question (2014), sitting at the devolved assembly in Stormont, shared Barnes's views that the anthem used by Northern Ireland sporting teams was not reflective of the entire community in the country. Carál Ní Chuilín touched upon this matter when

suggesting that there was a lack of complete cultural 'comfort' within the Catholic and nationalist communities in both representing and supporting Northern Ireland, due to the associated symbolism of flags and anthems:

In general, people across the north (Northern Ireland) have followed sport, became involved in sport due to their family and community background. An example of this is the "Northern Ireland" team. Lots of young people who are involved in soccer have traditionally supported a "national" team depending on their background. In my experience, attending Windsor Park has been problematic because the British national anthem is played at the beginning of the games. Many nationalists may watch the game on TV or listen to it on the radio but the anthem has been off-putting in terms of attendance.<sup>22</sup>

There appears to have been a clear diffusion of some of the unresolved issues of Northern Ireland's contentious past into the sporting sphere, even since the signing of the GFA. Perhaps more than any other incident concerning the nature of contested sporting identities outlined in this chapter, Barnes's snubbing of *Danny Boy* at the 2014 Commonwealth Games, presents a wealth of contextual value. *The Irish Times* reported on the difficulties caused by Barnes's remark, for example. In hailing from Belfast's Ardoyne district, which is annually at the centre of a dispute over Orange Order marches, it was claimed that 'his podium befuddlement was obviously construed as somehow sectarian'.<sup>23</sup> The incident also occurred within less than a year after a failed all-party talks initiative, chaired by U.S. senior diplomat Dr Richard Haass, designed to address the latest in a seemingly never-ending list of disputes between Northern Ireland's two ruling parties: the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin. In this case, the parties comprising the Government of Northern Ireland had once again failed to accept the opportunity of compromise, with local media having suggested that the talks were 'focused on the unfinished business of the peace process – specifically the vexed issues of flags, parades and the past'.<sup>24</sup> Unionist politicians were particularly unrelenting on the issue of flags, however. The failure of the talks initiative was inevitable given reports that 'Dr Haass and (his co-chair) Dr O'Sullivan have accepted they are not going to get agreement on flags in these talks and have decided to "park" the issue'.<sup>25</sup>

While the GFA was a remarkable political achievement, not least by concluding the violence and bloodshed of the internal ethno-sectarian conflict of Northern Ireland, it is clear that the agreement has limitations in the sphere of cultural reconciliation. It is evident, and beyond dispute, that these limitations have perpetuated a continuation – since 1998 – of the bitterly contested battleground of sporting identities in Northern Ireland. The GFA did acknowledge the need for both sides of the settlement to strive towards creating a more inclusive identity in a divided region, noting that

'All participants acknowledge the sensitivity of the use of symbols and emblems for public purposes, and the need in particular in creating the new institutions to ensure that such symbols and emblems are used in a manner which promotes mutual respect rather than division'.<sup>26</sup> It is undeniable upon further renewed analysis that the very next passage of the GFA, which declared, 'Arrangements will be made to monitor this issue and consider what action might be required',<sup>27</sup> have still not gone far enough.

It is now possible to draw links between the GFA and, what to date, has evidently been an impossible task of creating an agreed Northern Irish sporting identity, regardless of one's religious or community background and perspective. The compromises within the GFA, which can be viewed as attempting to settle issues of a contested identity present within wider society, was a recognition of 'the birth-right of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British'.<sup>28</sup> This can now be seen as contributing to the failure of efforts to create a shared Northern Irish sporting identity since 1998. The constitutional settlement has witnessed a continuation of the British national anthem being used by sports teams representing Northern Ireland. This has had inevitable consequences towards the failure in having a unique or, in any way, inclusive identity for all the people of that country. The question remains valid, that if *Land of my Fathers* and *Flower of Scotland* are unique national anthems for sport in Wales and Scotland respectively, why has sport in Northern Ireland remained with *God Save the Queen*, the British national anthem, for so long?

It is insufficient to suggest that the extent of exposure to events and symbols relating to identity in wider society experienced by an athlete will always be directly proportional to their cultural sensitivity when representing Northern Ireland in the sporting arena. However, from the case of Paddy Barnes it is clear that he was not fully comfortable representing Northern Ireland in competitive sport and all that this entailed. Judo player Eoin Fleming, also a Catholic from Belfast, represented Northern Ireland at the 2014 Commonwealth Games, but intends (if selected) to represent Ireland at the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo. When questioned about this impending defection, Fleming played down the role that questions of identity had played in making his own decision:

I definitely saw the Commonwealth games as a 'stepping stone' to me one day fighting for Ireland at the 2020 Olympics. When I fought at the Commonwealths, I was only 19, and still a junior in my sport. The Games were always seen as a way for me to get used to fighting in a Global games and see what the atmosphere would be like and how I react to a pressure situation. Glasgow 2014 was pretty much a mini Olympic Games. Everything about it, from the village to the transport to the stadiums, was created to replicate an Olympic Games atmo-

sphere. Something I was then able to experience again, only this time representing Ireland in the first ever European Olympic Games held in Baku in July 2015.<sup>29</sup>

It is clear that representing Northern Ireland, for some athletes, is a convenient platform when furthering their own careers. However, such a contention must always be qualified alongside varying degrees of 'cultural comfort' with what is associated with making this decision within the contested sporting identities of Northern Ireland. At the juvenile international soccer level, this is comparable with what former Northern Ireland under 21 international Deaglan Bunting referred to as a metaphorical 'shop window'<sup>30</sup> for the scouts at professional clubs in Britain. In Eoin Fleming's case, representing Northern Ireland constituted an interim step towards his ultimate ambition of competing at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games for Ireland.

Issues of identity affecting the sporting careers of Commonwealth and Olympic athletes have not been restricted merely to the sphere of amateur boxing or judo. Golfer Rory McIlroy, unquestionably Northern Ireland's highest profile sportsman of the modern era, was faced with a similar dilemma when golf was confirmed as a participating sport of the Olympic Games in 2016.<sup>31</sup> Golf's return to the Olympics, after an absence of over a century, may appear a benign decision and even welcomed from a distance, but for Northern Ireland's golfers, it meant a decision as to which nation to represent in competition had to be made. As confirmed in a report published by *The Irish Times*, Northern Ireland players such as Rory McIlroy were, 'eligible, under the Belfast Agreement (GFA), to play for Ireland or Great Britain'.<sup>32</sup>

In 1993, Sudden and Bairner had advanced a relatively sanguine view of golf and its relationship to the wider historical sectarian fault-lines of Irish sport. They suggested

the fact that it is essentially an individual pursuit has tended to minimise the dangers of serious sectarian contamination. Some of its practitioners might even argue that it is a game for "gentlemen" and "ladies", and as such has no room for the worst excesses of Irish political life.<sup>33</sup>

A game for gentlemen and ladies it may remain to this day; however, the GFA's dual nationality principles allowed golfers to become the centre of a controversy relating to the contested nature of sporting identities in Northern Ireland. This was a clear case of external factors and pressure groups impacting an individual golfer's (McIlroy's) decision regarding who to represent at an Olympic tournament, which differs from any explicit expression of cultural allegiance, such as that made by Paddy Barnes on the medals podium at the Commonwealth Games in 2014.

Rory McIlroy's deliberations, in which he had to make a decision over whether to represent Ireland or Great Britain in Olympic competition, was undoubtedly complicated by the fact that he had already won four of golf's major championships, as well as being ranked the world's number one player, before having to make such an inconvenient decision that threatened to alienate him from one side of the community in Northern Ireland. Although he represented a significant gold-medal opportunity for both Team GB and Team Ireland, senior executives associated with both Olympic federations realised the pressure he was under at that time and decided to allow McIlroy to make the decision himself.<sup>34</sup> This pressure is reflected in remarks made by McIlroy during interviews he gave at that time, and underlines the external pressure he was then under:

I just think being from where we're from, we're placed in a very difficult position. I feel Northern Irish and obviously being from Northern Ireland you have a connection to Ireland and a connection to the UK ... there are three options I am considering very carefully – play for one side or the other or not play at all as I may upset too many people.<sup>35</sup>

Sports writer Shane McGrath, perhaps encapsulated McIlroy's predicament more than any other suggesting that 'When the issue is nationality in Ireland, you will struggle to keep anyone happy'.<sup>36</sup>

It appears that the profile of the athlete in question, when a sporting matter collides with the latent and intractable issue of identity, will be in some way proportional to the level of controversy it arouses. Decisions made by Paddy Barnes, a multiple medalist at both Commonwealth and Olympic levels, and Rory McIlroy, at the time of his controversy the world's top golfer, inevitably were to come under greater scrutiny than athletes who did not constitute any meaningful prospect of success, or those hailing from sports that were comparatively less popular and attractive to only a minority of observers. Indeed Eoin Fleming claimed he would not have been under as much pressure (as the two aforementioned athletes) as his sport, judo, 'isn't considered a popular sport in Ireland or Britain. Therefore, we aren't under the spotlight and not many really seem to care who you represent or why you do'.<sup>37</sup> Particularly in McIlroy's case, the decision he faced on a sporting matter appeared to epitomise the 'zero-sum' nature of politics and society in Northern Ireland generally, with Team Ireland's gain representing a loss of a medal hope for Team GB. In any case, McIlroy was later to withdraw from his participation in the Rio Olympics due to health fears over the Zika virus, even if the explanation given failed to convince everyone that this was, indeed, the primary reason for his noninvolvement.<sup>38</sup>

The relationship between Northern Ireland and both the Commonwealth and Olympic games appears to have been underpinned by the terms of the GFA much more directly than the analysis, unpacked earlier, of club soccer

in Northern Ireland. This can be said to represent the continuation of a peculiar paradox, which is by no means unique or new to sport in that country:

Sport in general is still a powerful cultural metaphor for regional and international aggression ... the Olympic movement is itself highly committed to the concept of national representation. So long as agreements on the flying of national flags and the playing of national anthems remain as prerequisites to Olympic participation, in an epoch of ethnic and national conflict the Olympics will continue to be one of the world's greatest political showcases.<sup>39</sup>

### The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)

The GAA, Ireland's indigenous sporting body, appears to have undergone a remarkable transition in the years since the GFA, which has gone some way to helping reinvent its image as a progressive sporting organisation. Previously, Hassan and Telford had contended that the GAA, 'for much of its 129-year history has existed as a touchstone for opposition to the British presence in Ireland'.<sup>40</sup> The GAA, arguably more than any other sporting body, fostered the historic ethnic dividing line that has been at the core of sporting bodies in Ireland since their widespread establishment in the late nineteenth century. The formation of the GAA in 1884, in Garnham's view, 'introduced a much clearer division into Irish sport than had been the case before'.<sup>41</sup> As a result of its overtly nationalist ethos, the GAA has always had a strained relationship with the northern state and its Protestant-unionist community, even if this has dissipated somewhat over recent years. One survey carried out in the same year as the signing of the GFA (1998) resulted in Gaelic games, with hurling (15%), and Gaelic football (27%) being 'perceived as having helped to reinforce divisions'.<sup>42</sup> However, it is undeniable that the years since the GFA have borne witness to a number of symbolic and significant moves by the GAA that 'changed the public face of the GAA in Ireland beyond all recognition and in a manner that is certain to have a profound effect on its role in Irish life in the years ahead'.<sup>43</sup>

The deletion of Rule 21 from the GAA constitution in 2001 was the first of these profoundly significant moves. The ban on members of the security forces in Northern Ireland also holding membership in the GAA had stood for almost a century. This was a particularly sensitive issue for the GAA in the north of the country, given the – at times – challenging relationship between the security forces and the Catholic nationalist community of Northern Ireland. However, the removal of the rule represented something of a new dawn for the GAA, arguably heralding the beginning of a process of drawing a line under the history of its turbulent relationship with Unionism and all-things British.<sup>44</sup> This move also has added context, as it

was clearly a reactive measure initiated by the GAA in the context of the GFA. Improving the previously hostile relationship between the nationalist and republican communities and the new Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) was to be addressed by provisions outlined within the GFA:

Its proposals on policing should be designed to ensure that policing arrangements, including composition, recruitment, training, culture, ethos and symbols, are such that in a new approach Northern Ireland has a police service that can enjoy widespread support from, and is seen as an integral part of, the community as a whole.<sup>45</sup>

The unionist media largely welcomed the GAA's endorsement of the policing reforms, which can be viewed as having been set in motion by the GFA, and thus an era of progress for the association began in earnest.<sup>46</sup> A temporary relaxing of Rule 42 in 2005 was the next step by the GAA to permit the playing of the soccer and rugby union at its principle stadium, Croke Park, including an historic home international game featuring Ireland and England in rugby union.<sup>47</sup>

The deletion, in particular, of Rule 21 a decade earlier, was reinforced by a highly symbolic show of unity in April 2011 following the murder of PSNI officer Ronan Kerr, who was also a member of the Beragh Red Knights GAA club in County Tyrone. With the GAA's implied and then explicit support for the new police service in Northern Ireland being made fully manifest, Mr Kerr's funeral 'gave the GAA the opportunity to demonstrate the full extent of its transformation since the signing of the Belfast-Good Friday peace agreement in April 1998'.<sup>48</sup> The event marked the culmination of a *volte-face* for the GAA, with a showing of solidarity between the association and the police force in Northern Ireland, something that would have been unthinkable prior to the beginning of the peace process.<sup>49</sup>

Conclusion

Bairner's sage observation that 'It looks as if national flags will be on display at sports stadia throughout the world for a very long time to come. To understand what this means to the people waving the flags, however, it will be essential that each particular context is explored'<sup>50</sup> remains as valid now as when it was penned nearly two decades ago.

Rather than identity creation, it is clearly more feasible to now align sporting life in Northern Ireland with its capacity to 'sustain' an identity, acknowledging that 'sport can be used to demonize or champion an athlete as one of "them" or one of "us"'.<sup>51</sup> This apparent diffusion of wider societal problems into the sporting arena is not unique to Northern Ireland in the twenty-first century. Hoberman has previously pointed to the existence of such a phenomenon:

The infusion of ideological content into sport during the twentieth century illustrates a more general phenomenon – the penetration of political ideology into almost all forms of culture, the breadth and depth of this penetration depending on the ideological ambitions of the regime being discussed.<sup>52</sup>

In the case of club soccer, it could be said that the dying embers of the contested identity battleground within wider society, which partially ceded with the signing of the GFA, rumbled on for a few more years within the confines of the IFL's admissions structure. Similarly, the Olympic and Commonwealth Games spectrum, in particular, has fundamentally exposed the flaws within the identity provisions of the GFA. That said, the ambiguous rhetoric within the GFA was essential to secure political consensus in 1998. However, this has clearly, if inadvertently, undermined any attempt to successfully foster an agreeable sporting identity for Northern Ireland ever since. As such, amidst the continued green- or orange-tinted representation in sport in Northern Ireland since 1998, it is arguable that the GFA could 'continue to undermine, any regional political . . . (or sporting) . . . integration'.<sup>53</sup>

Notes

1 Alan Bairner, Sport, Nationalism and Globalisation: European and North American perspectives (Albany: University of New York Press, 2001), p. 177.  
2 Mike Cronin and David Mayall, 'Sport and ethnicity: Some introductory remarks', pp. 1–14, in Mike Cronin and David Mayall (eds.), *Sporting Nationalisms: Identity, Ethnicity, Immigration and Assimilation* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p. 2.  
3 Martin Polley, *Sports History: A Practical Guide* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), p. 8.  
4 Examples include, David Hassan, Shane McCullough and Elizabeth Moreland, 'North or south? Darron Gibson and the issue of player eligibility within Irish soccer', *Soccer & Society*, vol. 10, no. 6 (2009), pp. 740–753. and, 'CAS upholds Kearns' Ireland switch', *The Belfast Telegraph*, 30 July 2010.  
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# Spectators and supporters